

# *Newsletter for Birdwatchers*

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Newsletter Award 1997

I am happy to announce an Award for the most interesting article in the Newsletter during 1997. The article should be of about a thousand words and must be based on first hand observations in the field.

Dr Joseph George and Mr. S Sridhar will be the judges. In case of a disagreement between them Mrs Laeeq Futehally will be the arbiter. The award will consist of a prize of Rs 5000/-. In the event that the judges feel that there is no outstanding article deserving the prize, the judges could decide to split the prize money between 2 or 3 contributors.

Unlike in our political environment there will be no special consideration for muslims or scheduled castes. Neither will brahmins and foreigners be excluded.

So take your binoculars and step out into the field. After all you are members of the Birdwatchers' Field Club of India.

Peace Park

In Vol 36, No .. I had referred to proposals relating to Peace Parks between international boundaries. J.C. Daniel writes: "I do agree that it would be useful to have an International Peace Park in Kutch, but it does not appear possible at the moment.

I had found Pakistanis I met at International Conferences warm-hearted and wonderful people. However, the relationship between our two countries is so laden with suspicion and induced hatred that any friendly overture by a non-governmental Institution is likely to be viewed with suspicion and hostility by both Governments. I still remember with bitterness the unpleasantness that Dr Salim Ali had to face some years ago when we had our bird migration project. I am certain that if the BNHS is to take an initiative in this matter it will certainly be misconstrued.

However, I strongly recommend Dr Rahmani's suggestions that we take up the question of establishing Peace Parks on the India-Nepal and India-Bhutan borders. The India-China border has the same problems as the India-Pakistan border sanctuary proposal."

Suggestions for the next step will be welcome.

A Request to Contributors

I am surprised at the carelessly written notes and articles I receive from even so-called Senior Scientists. Why not check the text before dispatch for grammatical mistakes, wrong spelling, and so on. Also, there is a general tendency to write long articles where a shorter one would be more effective. A well known Editor told us recently that all he had to do was to remove half the words from the texts he received to make them twice as worthwhile. Please keep this in mind. Don't use two adjectives where one will do, and don't repeat the same statement in a different part of your presentation.

Also please send cheques, MOs as subscription, to the Publisher not to the Editor.



## Comments on the Newsletter

It is always satisfying to get a response from readers, even though these remarks are critical. I refer to letters from Lavkumar Khacher, L.A. Hill, V Gokula and others. A question arises : how "scientific" should the NL aim to be. For example should the biometrics of birds be included, as is done in the article on Kutch by Tiwari in this issue. I presume that such details should normally go to the BNHS or SACON. But an occasional intrusion of technical data may be of interest to some specialists, and does not distort the general tone of the Newsletter.

## An Anonymous Tribute

Anonymous letters should normally be disregarded on principle. They are also usually abusive. But this one was laudatory beyond measure about the Newsletter and its Editor. I quote one para, addressed obviously to those who sometimes allow their feelings to over-rule their minds. "... As in the past please make sure that cynicism and sarcasm do not find place in its pages. Criticism let there be, because it serves a purpose. But sarcasm... is contrary to the spirit in which you have been bringing out the NL with such devotion for furthering the cause of bird study".

In the past few months we have had many comments about the quality, the purpose, and the direction of your Newsletter. Further comments on the general policy of the NL for the moment are unnecessary. Criticism (balanced and constructive) on individual pieces are of course welcome.

## Birds of South Western India by Ranjit Daniels

Ranjit Daniels has written a useful book — A Regional Survey of the Birds of South West India which includes the Western Ghats, the sea coast and parts of the Deccan Plateau. Apart from the introduction, philosophising on the manner in which birds appeared on the Indian continent in the late Pleistocene era 45 million years ago, and their distribution in the sub-continent, 509 species have been described and coloured illustrations provided for most of them. The reference number of the Handbook against each species makes it easy to refer to other sources. It is priced at Rs 595/-. I hope a cheaper paperback edition will follow.

## Visit Israel :

The Israel Ornithology Centre provides a good opportunity for birders to learn about birds while participating in a ringing project. A fine opportunity for someone with the time and the money. See the Announcement in this Issue.



# Avian Profile of Chhari-dhand, Kutch, Gujarat, India

## Abstract

This study highlights the avifauna of a seasonal wetland. It describes the new ornithological records for Kutch. The study provides a brief account of habitat change and its impact on the avifauna of the region.

## Introduction

A huge fresh water jheel (area c. 80 sq kms) known as Chhari-Dhand is a prominent feature of the Banni Grassland, in Kutch. The jheel is bordered by stands of *Tamarix* sp., *Salvadora persica* and *S. oleoides* interspersed by clumps of herbs. This water body is seasonal, filling up during years of heavy precipitation and through spillovers from the nearby irrigation reservoirs (viz Bhukhi, Mathal, Nara, Gajansar). It gradually turns saline due to excessive evapotranspiration and the high contents of dissolved salts in the soil. A huge concentration of waterfowl utilise this 'Dhand' during the fall migration. During the years of good rainfall the 'Banni' becomes the wintering ground of enormous flocks of common crane, (*Grus grus*) numbering around 25,000 (Census 1990) in the vicinity of Dhand.

Bird banding in the Dhand was initiated primarily to trap waders. Besides the large concentration of waterbirds, a good population of raptors too frequents the area during the fall migration.

The major avifauna of the lake comprises Pelecanidae, Phoenicopteridae, Ciconidae, Anatidae, Charadriidae Laridae, Accipitridae, Falconidae and Gruidae. About twenty-nine species of raptors and ninety-three species of

J.K. TIWARI, Ex-Scientist, Bombay Natural History Society

waterfowl have been recorded from the Dhand. Our waterbird trap was dominated by *Calidris* sp. *Tringa* sp. and *Gallinago* sp.

The construction of a series of checkdams and irrigation reservoirs on the stream which previously used to flow unhindered into the area together with the laying of numerous roads/bunds in the 'Banni' has affected the water regime thus contributing to the gradual shrinkage of the Dhand over the years. This is further aggravated by siltation by windblown sand. Substantial portions of the area around the Dhand have been gradually invaded by the exotic weed, *Prosopis juliflora*, thus altering the habitat of the area.

## Objectives

The primary objectives of this study (as mentioned below) were to provide a base line data for this important wetland in Kutch, so that it could be used to formulate a scientific basis for management.

- 1 To study the movement of migratory waders and waterfowl
- 2 Study the migration of passerines
- 3 Record the floral and faunal profile
- 4 Assess the impact of human and cattle interference on the ecosystem with special reference to its bird life
- 5 Study the land-use pattern and utilization of the waterbody by the local inhabitants
- 6 Submit recommendations for the conservation of this wetland.



## Materials and methods

This study was conducted over a period of two years (January 1990 to January 1992). The following techniques were used.

- 1 Census (Waterbird count) from strategic points
- 2 Bird ringing — water birds were trapped using the following techniques :
  - i) Throw nets (light and sound technique)
  - ii) Snares or nooses
  - iii) Claptraps
  - iv) Wader-netting in the night

Birds trapped were identified, banded, measured, weighed, moult recorded and released in the same habitat.

## New Ornithological Records for Kutch

### 1 Blacknecked grebe (*Podiceps nigricollis*)

On 8.1.1990, two birds were recovered from a local fisherman at Chhari-Dhand. Both the birds were adults (winter plumage). Both specimens were trapped in the fisherman's gill nets.

Uncommon winter visitor sporadically recorded in Baluchistan, Sindh, Punjab (Ali 1983).

### 2 Dalmatian pelican (*Pelecanus philippensis*)

On 4.3.1990, three pelicans were sighted amongst a flock of about 1500 rosy pelicans (*Pelecanus onocrotalus*) at Chhari-Dhand. The crescentic tuft of feathers above the bill was clear. As we approached them, they took to their wings. In flight their grey legs (pinkish in rosy pelicans) were clearly visible; the dusky white under surface also stood out and confirmed our identification. On three more occasions Dalmatian pelicans were sighted in the lake. They settled in separate flocks some distance away from the rosy pelicans.

The Dalmatian pelican has been reported only once before in Kutch in 1964 (Himmatsinhji, Pers. Comm.).

### 3 Marbled teal (*Marmaronetta angustirostris*)

On 11.2.1990, a flock of about 200 marbled teal were sighted in Chhari-Dhand. This is the largest collection of marbled teal reported from our limits.

This sighting could be postulated as a successful outcome of the reintroduction of this species started at Lal Suharna Reserve (Pakistan). So far, this species has been recorded in this part of the country only as a rare straggler, including one bird obtained in Kutch in 1940 — (Birds of Kutch, p.169).

### 4 Greylag goose (*Anser anser*)

On 25.11.90, one greylag goose was observed on dry land near the lake. This particular bird was following a flock of 6 common cranes (*Grus grus*). It was sighted regularly for the next 3-4 days with the cranes. The present sight record is after a gap of almost 77 years. (JBNHS, V 21, pp 678-679, March 31, 1912).

Interestingly, Chhari-Dhand was a regular hunting ground of the Kutch royal family and goose shoots were arranged annually till about the first decade of this century.

The last big shoot was organised in the winter of 1912-13 after which the geese were not sighted. Climatic vagaries, scarcity of rains, sand storms etc. seem to have disrupted the bird life around the Dhand (HH Vijarajji, 1934).

### 5 Cinereous vulture (*Aegypius monachus*)

Described as a rare and sparse winter visitor to Sindh, NW and Northern India (including Nepal), Kutch, N Gujarat and Central India, South to about Dhalia in Khandesh (c 21°N) the cinereous vulture, affects open savannah and semi-desert country. A rare vulture, seen singly in winter, very little has been recorded about this species in India. It was not recorded during the survey for Birds of Kutch, Ali (1945). A solitary cinereous vulture was observed in the Banni, Dist Kutch on 9.3.1960 among the gathering of other vultures, Ali (1960). Subsequently another one was again observed on 10.3.1960 at Kuverbet, Ali (Op. Cit) these are the first known records of this species in Kutch.

During the BNHS Bird Migration studies in Kutch, we observed this species regularly in the Banni especially around the freshwater jheel known as Chhari-Dhand. Though it is described as rare, we often saw two birds while once, four of them were observed in the same spot. Scattered over a wide area around the Chhari-Dhand (Table 1). On 11.1.1991 five individuals of this species were observed feeding on a carcass in the Chhari-Dhand among a mixed flock of whitebacked vulture (*Gyps benghalensis*), long billed vulture (*Gyps indicus*) a king vulture (*Sarcogyps calvus*) and a Griffon vulture (*Gyps fulvus*).

Table 1

Sl. No.	Date	Area	Taluka	Nos Sighted
1.	01.02.90	Chhari-Dhand	Nakhtrana	2
2.	04.02.90	"	"	2
3.	07.03.90	"	"	1
4.	19.11.90	"	"	2
5.	25.11.90	"	"	4
6.	25.11.90	"	"	2
7.	04.12.90	"	"	1
8.	04.12.90	"	"	1
9.	23.12.90	"	"	1
10.	02.01.90	Servo-Dhand	Bhuj	1
11.	11.10.91	Chhari-Dhand	Nakhtrana	5
12.	03.12.90	"	"	1
13.	07.03.91	"	"	1

### 6 Eastern golden plover (*Pluvialis dominica*)

On 26.1.1991, in the bird catch by our Mirshikar trappers, one eastern golden plover (*Pluvialis dominica*) was found. Its biometrics were as follows :

Wing — 174 mm Bill — 31 mm Tarsus — 42.5 mm  
Tail — 66 mm Wt — 103 gms

The bird was undergoing head and body moult; it was ringed and released.

A flock of 50-60 birds was observed once at Changdai jheel (Mandvi-Taluka) in the second week of March 1944, Ali (1945).

Hence the present ringing record is the second of this species from Kutch.



### 7 Golden plover (*Pluvialis apricaria*)

On 14.11.1990, a golden plover was trapped. The bird was ringed and released. Its biometrics were as follows :

Wing — Moulting      Bill — 28 mm      Tarsus — 39 mm  
Tail — Moulting      Wt — 75 gms

This is the second record of this species from Kutch. Earlier two golden plovers were reported by Captain Butler (1875-76) from Kutch. The distribution of this species in Kutch is not mentioned by Ali (1945) (1987) in Birds of Kutch and the Handbook. The present ringing record of the Golden Plover comes after a lapse of 116 years.

### 8 Broadbilled sandpiper (*Limicola falcinellus*)

One specimen was ringed on 28.4.1990. Its biometrics were as follows :

Wing — 104 mm      Bill — 37 mm      Tarsus — 24.5 mm  
Tail — 38 mm      Wt — 104 gms

In the field it can be confused with the dunlin (*Calidris alpina*) and the curlew sandpiper.

Affects the coastline, tidal mud flats, muddy creeks and brackish lagoons and sand banks, Ali (1983). A similar habitat exists at Chhari-Dhand, where the water becomes saline with open shallow mud flats during the months of March-April.

This is the first positive ringing record for this species from Kutch.

### 9 Curlew sandpiper (*Calidris testacea*)

One specimen of this species was ringed and released in April 1990 at Chhari-Dhand. Can be confused with dunlin, but in hand it is easily distinguished from the latter by its slightly larger size, longer legs and white upper tail coverts.

This is again the first ringing record of this species from Kutch.

### 10 Slenderbilled gull (*Larus genei*)

On 2.2.1991 at Nir Vandh on the edge of the Great Rann of Kutch we observed a huge concentration of slenderbilled gull *Larus genei*. According to our count there were c. 5600 slenderbilled gulls 5-7 lesser blackbacked gull. Said to be common on Kutch-Saurashtra coast Ali (1987), resident, breeding in our limits, numbers augmented in winter by immigrants, Ali (Op. Cit). This is the first record of such a huge concentration of this species in Kutch, and can be explained as follows.

- 1 Immigrants' dispersal in different parts of Kutch from this place, as it is (Nir Vandh) fairly close to Sindh.
- 2 There are reports (Anonymous 1991) of slenderbilled gull affected by oil spills in the Gulf along with many other species e.g. great cormorant, great black headed gull, reef heron, curlew, pintail etc., it is just a theory that these gulls affected by recent oil spills in the Gulf had changed their usual routes towards safer places.

### 11 Indian skimmer (*Rynchops albicollis*)

The Indian skimmer (*Rynchops albicollis*), has been described as a resident, nomadic and also a locally migratory species, depending upon water conditions, Ali &

Ripley (1983). Reported to be fairly common in Pakistan (Baluchistan, Singh, Punjab, Indus system) and Bangladesh (Ali & Ripley Op. Cit).

It is less common southward through Andhra Pradesh (Narmada, Tapti, Mahanadi, Godavari and Krishna rivers), Ali & Ripley (Op. Cit.).

It is a vagrant elsewhere (Kutch, Mt Abu, Bombay) Ripley (1982). Once several were seen on a lake at Mt Abu, Rajasthan, Butler (1875-76). The species has not been mentioned in the Birds of Kutch, Ali (1945).

Surprisingly during our bird migration studies in Kutch, we observed this species regularly and in widely scattered locations in the district (Table 2).

From our observations spread over almost two years, it appears that the bird has established itself in the area, with its numbers being augmented during good rainfall years. Moreover, the presence of several irrigation reservoirs in the district seems to have attracted the species from adjacent Sindh areas.

Table 2

Sl. No.	Date	Area	Taluka	Nos. Sighted
1.	19.05.90	Chhari-Dhand	Nakhtrana	1
2.	12.02.91	Sardar Post	Bhuj	2
3.		Rann of Kutch		
4.	15.03.91	Modhva Seacoast	Mandvi	2
5.	02.10.90	Dhdko Banni	Nakhtrana	3
6.	16.11.90	Jathavera	Nakhtrana	2
	02.11.90	"	"	2

### Human utilisation of the Wetland and nearby Habitat

Chhari-Dhand and the habitat around is a multiple use area. The primary use of the terrestrial habitat around the Dhand is cattle grazing. The aquatic habitat (Jheel) is used for fishing by local fishermen and as a drinking water source for their livestock.

### Utilisation of the Terrestrial Habitat

The places near the lake has a good amount of grass and *Sueda fruticosa*, *Cressa cratica*. The main occupation of the people living in the villages of Banni grassland is cattle rearing. Buffalo, cow, sheep, goat and camel are reared for mutton and milk. During good rainfall years, cattle herders from the adjacent areas with their livestock immigrate to use the area around the lake, hordes of cattle trample and exploit the habitat, thus leading to the denudation and loosening of the soil, which during the dry spell of the year is blown by the high winds prevailing in the area and the depth of the wetland is reduced by this windblown soil. Moreover, the cattle dropping contains the seeds of an exotic weed American mesquite (*Prosopis juliflora*) which on getting moist germinate and spread over the grassland most of which has already been over-run by the exotic weed.



### Use of Aquatic habitat

**Fishing** — Fishing is done by local fishermen from the Banni, the catch is sent to nearby town, by tempos. This is done under licence provided by the District Fisheries Officer. Gill nets are used to trap Rhou and chhana species. An estimated catch of about 1000 kg per day is harvested from the Chhari-Dhand.

The gill nets sometimes cause the entangling of diving birds like coots, grebes, and pochards. Fishing seems to give good economic return from this wetland.

### Management recommendations

- 1 Rotational grazing by making plots should be practised. This will check the problem of over grazing.
- 2 Check on outside cattle — A complete ban on outside cattle.
- 3 The wetland and the habitat around is of international importance, as revealed by the concentration of waders and waterfowl supported by this pristine aquatic and grassland habitat. We therefore recommend to the concerned authorities to declare the Chhari-Dhand area as a sanctuary and wetland of International importance.
- 4 Annual removal of Mesquite seedlings — Just after the rain, the saplings, germinating from cattle droppings should be derooted and destroyed. This will check the spread of *Prosopis juliflora* in the area.
- 5 Diverting the scarcity relief programme in deepening of the lake, when it is dry. Although it seems impractical to dig out or buldoze the entire lake, a certain area can be selected for deepening. This will help to retain the water for a longer time.

Some portions of the lake can be dug to a depth of say 3-4 feet over a 200-300 metres stretch. This will help bird species like Pelicans which need deep water for fishing.

- 6 Water management of the Chhari-Dhand by storing water at Keera and Palkhiari dams. These old dams can be repaired and water can be brought to the wetland by a small canal.
- 7 Making bunds around the wetland. The major cause of desiccation is very high wind velocity of the area. To check this, bunds around the wetland would help. *Tamarix* and local species of vegetation like *Sueda fruticosa* and *salsoda* would check wind erosion.
- 8 Environmental awareness programme — Conservation consciousness can be best achieved by designing a

specific audio-visual programme on the benefits of protecting and managing the wetland as a sanctuary. Bharucha EK and Gogte PP (1990). This can be shown to local people on market days, and to village schools in the area.

### Acknowledgements

We are thankful to the Chief Wildlife Warden, Gujarat for granting permission to trap and ring birds in Gujarat.

We are also thankful to MKS Himmatsinhji, SN Varu, NN Bapat for providing us useful information on the birds of Kutch. Help provided by Brig S Saini, Brig Malik and the local BSF commander for surveying the Kunverbet area is duly acknowledged.

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## Birds in and around the Thermal Camp II at Tuticorin

H Daniel Wesley, 126, Ramalinganagar South, Tiruchirapalli 620 017

**T**uticorin is on the Southern Coast of the Bay of Bengal 8.8°N 78.2°E. It is about 32 km from Tiruchendur — 8.5°N 78.1°E and Palayamkottai — 8.7°N 77.7°E and about twice that distance from Kanyakumari — 8.1°N 77.6°E. I observed the birds in and around the thermal camp II for about thirty hours on nine days — 14th to 22nd June 1996. The Thermal Camp II, about 10 ha is a fortified and compact staff quarters. On its eastern front is the beach about 200 m away. On its back is a vast area overgrown with *Prosopis juliflora* that extends as far as Camp I on the west. On its southern side is another vast area of prosopises. The road from Tuticorin town from the northern side goes southward along the front of the camp and bending at the southern corner of the camp, leads through the prosopis vegetation to Spic and Tiruchendur road — a half circle of about 8 km.

I observed the birds within the half circle, walking through the thorn-strewn prosopis grove, criss-crossing it from different directions for about three hours from 5.30 am on six days. On other days I walked on the beach and adjacent areas of prosopis. The area on the back of the camp is slightly undulating with a long south-north stretch of barren depression of cracked surface overlying soft blackish brown soil; prosopis has not colonized there. But along the edges there were thick stretches of low succulent vegetation about 30 cm tall. In the hard-surfaced area prosopis predominates with *Calotropis gigantea* in between, except at one spot, close to the Camp-wall and encircled by prosopises, where the latex weed forms the sole vegetation growing to about 3 meters tall. Some of the large thorny trees were covered over by luxuriant climbers and twiners making the underside cavernous. The bases of the low bushy prosopises were encircled with grass. Lying on the ground below of 70-75% of the prosopises were empty white shells of pulmonate gastropods. Sticking on to branches were live ones of the same colour. I wonder what the vegetation was in the region before the exotic plant took over. The hut-dwellers outside the area obtain their fuel energy from this plant.

Of the 50 species of birds recorded from the area, two were recognised only by their calls; another two were not expected to be around there being out-of-season, unless they were residents, which seems unlikely. Would they continue thereabouts till the arrival of others in the coming winter? Or were they on their way back home from any other geographical zone?

### About the Birds

#### Spot billed pelican — *Pelecanus philippensis*

Standing on the house top on the 14th I observed three birds alternately winging and floating over the Western dry land of prosopis towards south and beyond Spic. At 1410 h on the 15th a lone bird was about fifty feet above me, drifting away, wings spread and the head drawn in its characteristic

way, scanning the area towards the sea. Were the former going to Kadambakuzham, a large water body, where I had observed pelicans on 20th October, 1969, that lies at about 30 km South of Tuticorin? Do these birds fish in the shallow part of the sea too?

#### Little cormorant — *Phalacrocorax niger*

Riding pillion on a scooter on the 13th from the bus stand to the camp, I observed a little cormorant over the salt pans. On the 16th, three birds flew northwest of the camp. At 0645 h on the 20th one bird was flying over the Port Trust Office towards the new harbour. Do these cormorants forage in the sea?

#### Grey heron — *Ardea cinerea*

Only one bird was observed. At 0645 h on the 22nd it was flying over the prosopis area behind the camp to beyond Spic.

#### Purple heron — *Ardea purpurea*

A bird was seen at 1850 h flying from beyond the west prosopis area. As it was getting dusk and dark it could not be further observed. Perhaps it had emerged from the vegetation in the little water that was there by the St. John's Freight System north west of the camp.

#### Little egret — *Egretta garzetta*

Only one bird was observed to fly low over the camp at 0810 h on the 22nd. However, about 30 birds were seen sitting together on the road-side backwater salt pans on the way from the town on the 13th.

#### Cattle egret — *Bubulcus ibis*

On the 14th, 15th, 19th and 20th single birds were seen going in different directions over the camp, and beyond, criss-crossing the prosopis area. Close to the house but outside the campus in the prosopis area were a few buffaloes. A cattle egret, true to its name, literally followed the foot steps of an animal, coming into the area over the camp very early in the mornings of 17th, 18th and 19th and was there the whole day.

#### Pond heron — *Ardeola grayii*

Three birds were foraging, on all days, among the dry fallen leaves of the neem trees within the camp but close to the compound wall so that they could occasionally move over the wall to be on or under the prosopis. None of them were in breeding plumage. Only one bird was observed on the beach among the prosopis. On the 20th a lone breeding bird with a nuchal crest was foraging on the ground, behind the camp, occasionally coming on top of prosopis. None of them had red tarsi.

#### Openbilled stork — *Anastomus oscitans*

On the 15th I was lying on my back on the floor of the drawing room of the house. I could look out on to the



common balcony and the sky. At 1330 the three-year-old grand daughter exclaimed "Look! something up there". About 50 openbilled storks were gliding past towards the thermal plant and beyond, north. Were they coming from Kodambakuzham of Tirunelveli District? At 0635 h on 16th nine birds were going in the reverse direction over the prosopises and beyond Spic.

**Spotbilled duck** — *Anas poecilorhyncha*

At 0635 h four ducks flew past me as I was walking through the prosopis area, getting into it from the Spic road. They were coming from south beyond Spic, and moving Northward. The splash of white on either side of the rump was a good marker of the species in flight.

**Black-winged kite** — *Elanus caeruleus*

Only one bird was observed over the entire period. The black on the wing coverts was thick and the rest of the wings and body were ashy white. The wings were pointed. It flew/glided low over/and among the prosopises scanning the ground.

**Pariah kite** — *Milvus migrans*

The commoner of the two kites, it was seen over the camp, the prosopis area and the beach, occasionally dipping down to take titbits.

**Brahminy Kite** — *Haliastur indus*

Only single birds were observed over the camp. At 0630 h on 18th two kites were sitting side by side, one on the electric pole, and the other on the cross bar. The second one was a little pale and was being attacked by the one on the pole. It appeared as though the one being attacked was sick and lame.

**Hawk** — *Accipiter sp.*

The bird was only heard calling tutui.. tutui from among the casuarina trees and was not located.

**Common peafowl** — *Pavo cristatus*

At 1410 h on 15th, a peacock was standing in the shade of a large prosopis just outside the camp by the wall. The same day, at 1850, another (?) on the northern side crossed the road and disappeared from view.

**Grey partridge** — *Francolinus pondicerianus*

A very vociferous bird calling from all directions, far and near. I recognised the calls as resembling *uskeetharaph*, *uskeetharaph* ... They were mostly in the grass at the bases of prosopis bushes from which they dashed off as I passed by them. Particularly early in the morning, a response (?) call was made: harsh throaty and loud *kuku*, *kukuk*, *kukuka*. On the 16th, five chicks of varying sizes emerged from under a prosopis bush and, walking in fits and starts, picked up, simultaneously and in turns, what appeared to be shade-borne insects.

**Black-winged stilt** — *Himantopus himantopus*

A total of four birds were observed on 13th, 16th and 17th either flying over the camp or feeding in the waters outside the area here reported about.

**Red-wattled lapwing** — *Vanellus indicus*

Birds were heard calling on all days from about 0520 h. Maximum number of birds seen together at one time was four. They changed positions between beach and inland over the prosopis, often landing on the barren depressions.

**Ringed plover** — *Charadrius sp.*

Two birds (a pair?) were on the beach at 0710 h on the 18th. They stopped moving, and when stood full erect, looked bigger than the little ringed plover. As I did not have the binoculars then, I was not sure of their identity. They both took off over the surf calling *pip .. pip .. pip ..* a call not recorded so far(?).

**Tern** — ?

About the size of the house crow, eight birds were following the swish and swash of the waves on the beach, southward. They had a very light ashy white upper surface and no black on any part of the body. The nature of the bill could not be verified without the binoculars.

**Gull billed tern** — *Gelochelidon nilotica*

Six birds were following the waves as the previous ones, but going before them, occasionally dipping low and rising but never rising above 10 m from the land surface.

**Blue rock pigeon** — *Columba livia*

Some birds, mostly singly, were seen outside the thermal quarters and over the port. They were not observed to mingle with the domesticated varieties being kept by the fisher folk on the sea shore.

**Indian ring dove** — *Streptopelia decaocta*

Five birds were observed to be sitting on high tension electric wires or on top twigs of the prosopises. They did not associate themselves with the other doves. The only other birds that sat with them were the common mynas.

**Spotted dove** — *Streptopelia chinensis*

Three pairs were recorded, one remaining closely with three little brown doves in the prosopis on the sea shore, and the other in the camp II. From the behaviour of the latter refusing to leave a certain place I believe that they had marked off the territory.

**Little brown dove** — *Streptopelia senegalensis*

Seven birds were counted occurring in twos, threes and singles, some associated with the previous species. They were not heard calling at all during the period of observation.

**Pied-crested cuckoo** — *Clamator jacobinus*

A bird was heard calling a series of *keon .. keon .. keon ..* thrice on the 21st for varying durations of 28, 22 and 12 seconds respectively. On 22nd another (?) was heard making single notes: *Titi .. Titi ..* as it flew over a house crow's nest in a neem within the campus. Its activity seemed to coincide with that of the white-headed babblers now calling aloud in courtship. Both the species had become active in Tiruchirapalli too indicating similarity of breeding season.



**Koel — *Eudynamis scolopacea***

A very vociferous bird calling from the prosopises and moving in and out of the camp. It also called on the nest of the house crow in the neem tree.

**Small green-billed malkoha — *Rhopodytes viridirostris***

Two pairs of the bird were hopping about in the prosopises about 200 meters apart. The blue in the eye ring was rather thick and fresh, unlike those at servalar, and resembled closely the looks of those Tiruchirapalli district.

**Crow-pheasant — *Centropus sinensis***

Moving about on the ground and among the prosopis boughs, quite frequently coming on top of them, were three birds. They were heard on all days in and outside the camp. The empty shells of the snails under prosopis bushes are believed to have been of those that formed the meal of the bird. I have seen the bird at Palayamkottai take snails with red stripe attached to the undersurface of *Delonix alba* by jumping from the ground to dislodge them. Getting the snail down, it extracted the live snail through the mouth of the cell. I have also seen it take the saw-scaled viper — (*Echis carinata*) that was common around my house. At Tuticorin it may be consuming the small lizard, *Sitana pondiceriana* that is quite common there.

**Brown wood owl — *Strix leptogrammica* (?)**

A bird about the size of a partridge, of the colour of the bleached brick or of the brahminy kite glided from a tree to the ground or to a low branch of another tree. Could not follow it owing to the ground between the trees being strewn with broken thorny twigs.

**Alpine swift — *Apus melba* (?)**

At 1040 h on the 16th, riding pillion on a scooter, I saw 8 to 10 birds much bigger than the palm swifts that were there, the flight pattern much like the Alpine swift's, flying south over the camp houses.

**House swift — *Apus affinis***

At about 0700 h on two very dark black birds, with white rump and no white on the chin, were proceeding south along the coast. Was that a foraging trip of the birds from Sri Lanka which, I am told, is viewable from atop the tallest chimney of the Thermal plant in Tuticorin, or accidentally blown over the ocean by the recent gale?

**Palm swift — *Cypsiurus parvus***

A very common bird throughout the day all over the place. The puzzle about the bird is that there were no palmyra trees as far as I could see. Though in general plumage colour it is similar to that in Tiruchirapalli, it was lighter on the belly, the undertail coverts, rump and 3/4 of the tail.

**White-breasted kingfisher — *Halcyon smyrnensis***

Two birds were found inside the camp and one outside on the coastal prosopis.

**Green bee eater — *Merops orientalis***

Eight birds seen in and out of the camp were without the mid-tail-pin.

**Hoopoe — *Upupa epops***

Only the call of a bird was heard by the Port-Trust guest house.

**Bush lark — *Mirafra erythroptera***

A common bird there, the males were in aerial courtship display. They appeared to have a local dialectal variation in that the "Sisi si" .. has changed into Titi ... preceded/followed by witchi ... instead of wisse ... with, Tinkraku .. etc. repeated till it descended to the ground.

**Ashy-crowned finch lark — *Eremopterix grisea***

A very common bird on electric wires, roads, road sides and on the open grounds between prosopises. Courtship display was sporadic.

**Black drongo — *Dicurus adsimilis***

Mostly silent in and outside the camp, on prosopis and TV antennas.

**Common myna — *Acridotheres tristis***

The only myna in the area observed and was found all over including the beach.

**House crow — *Corvus splendens***

The only crow in the area, was observed eating left overs of crabs and a turtle. One was collecting nesting material within the camp. Another had already made a nest in a neem tree.

**Red-vented bulbul — *Pycnonotus cafer***

A fairly common bird active in pairs all over the place.

**White-headed babbler — *Turdoides affinis***

Not a very common bird in the area, only one troop was observed. Its characteristic breeding call was heard in the forenoons on the 21st and 22nd.

**Streaked fantailed warbler — *Cisticola juncidis***

A male was in courtship display over succulent herbs on the sea coast. More were seen.

**Plain wren-warbler — *Prinia subflava***

Its rattling call could be heard all through the day wherever one went. It was next to the grey partridges in making incessant call.

**Tailorbird — *Orthotomus sutorius***

A common bird despite broad-leaved nesting plants are few and far between. A dialect in the call Pudy .. Pudy .. changing to Pudtchy .. Pudtchy .. in the population at Tiruchirapalli has been mutated to P(K)urdy .. at Tuticorin.

**Paddyfield pipit — *Anthus novaeseelandiae***

Not so abundant as the larks, only four birds were recorded, one displaying, calling chiruchiruchiru ... c.c.c., c.c.c., ... etc.



**Pied Wagtail — *Motacilla maderaspatensis***

Only two birds were observed, one on house tops in the camp, and another far west in the prosopis area.

**Purple sunbird — *Nectarinia asiatica***

An abundant and widely distributed bird in the area of observation. The males in eclipse and breeding plumages were common sipping nectar from the milk weeds.

**Purple-rumped Sunbird — *Nectarinia zeylonica***

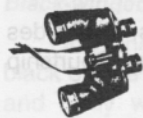
Despite the abundant opportunity for nesting in the prosopis there were only three pairs, very widely distributed, perhaps in competition with the dominating *N. asiatica*.

**House sparrow — *Passer domesticus***

The few birds in the area were concentrated in the camp, sitting on TV antennas along with the drongoes and sunbirds, and around the fisher folks' huts.

**Common silverbill — *Lonchura malabarica***

A family of three juveniles and parents was observed among the prosopis on the spic-side of the road.



## Is the Mallard Spreading In India ?

ASAD R RAHMANI, Centre of Wildlife & Ornithology, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh 202 002, India

The Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*) is one of the most common ducks in Europe and America but it is an uncommon winter visitor in India. Ali & Ripley (1983) say "Breeds in small number in Kashmir ... Apparently no longer so common in northern W. Pakistan (Bahawalpur) where until c. 1940 at least it often formed 70 to 80 per cent of sportsmen's seasonal bags of ducks. Common in lower Sind, decreasingly so eastward through UP, Nepal, Bihar, Bengal, E. Pakistan (Bangladesh) to Assam; southward sparingly to rare to about 19°N in Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and northern Maharashtra". I always found mallards to be rare in the wetlands of northern India. Even at Bharatpur, where I have been doing bird watching for the last 25 years or so, only a pair or two of mallards would be present among thousands of pintail (*Anas acuta*), shoveller (*Anas clypeata*), wigeon (*Anas penelope*), common teal (*Anas crecca*), etc.

During the last five years, since joining the Centre of Wildlife in 1991, I have been visiting the following four wetlands regularly: Shekha jheel, Aama Khera jheel, Ash Dump yard wetland, and Patna Bird Sanctuary (in Etah district). The former three wetlands are in Aligarh district. In all these wetlands I have seen a noticeable increase of mallards every year. In 1992-93 winter, in Ash Dump yard wetland, one or two pairs of mallard were noted but this winter (1996-97), we counted 40 pairs. In Aama Khera jheel, having 3-4 thousand duck every winter, I do not remember seeing any mallard in 1991-92 but in 1993-94 and 1995-96 winters, 2-4 pairs were seen. But this winter, I have already counted 10 pairs. I first visited Patna Bird Sanctuary on 7 January 1991 and noticed only two pairs of mallard, among one hundred thousand ducks and waders. But during December 1996, I counted ten pairs (probably there were many more, mixed with assorted species of ducks). Patna jheel [see vol XXXI (7&8), 1991] is a well-protected bird sanctuary and now holds thousands of ducks, waders, storks, egrets, herons, etc.

My question is: Is there an increase in the mallard population in Europe and Central Asia and so we are getting

more birds. Or, is the mallard spreading eastward? The Handbook says that in the 1940s, mallard formed 70-80 per cent of the bags of hunters in Pakistan, so this species must have been abundant at that time in western parts of the Indian sub-continent. According to TJ Roberts (Birds of Pakistan, Vol.1, p.136): "They occur all over Pakistan but sometimes in a rather patchy distribution. Considerable concentrations have been counted, e.g. 300 on Warsak dam headpond, North West Frontier Province ...". One more indication of the mallard's population fluctuation is that the Handbook says they are common in lower Sind (probably based on records of 1930s and 1940s when shooting records were kept) but Roberts says that in Sind, they are very common, and normally 400 to 500 winter on the three larger lakes north-west of Karachi.

Will the mallard further increase in number and range in India? We may be seeing just a temporary shifting of wintering areas of mallard. Has mallard gone through population fluctuations earlier? Have other people also seen more mallards in the wetlands of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan in recent years? There are a host of interesting questions. It will be interesting if birdwatchers keep an eye on this phenomenon and meticulously note all mallard sightings.

This again reaffirms my opinion that we should have a nationally and regionally coordinated annual bird count of selected sites by reliable people. If we can collect and collate good and accurate data for 5-10 years, we will get some indication of the population fluctuation of our birds.

**Editor :**

Asad Rahmani wonders if mallard populations fluctuate over the years. Readers will recall Aamir Ali's letter from Geneva (Vol 35, No.5, p 95) where he says that in the little lake at Champex, for years there were none. Then there was a couple. Then there was a peak at 60 individuals. Then a decline to just a couple. There are just too many factors involved affecting the rise and fall of population. Rahmani and his colleagues have an interesting line to pursue.



## Storks of Walayar

PRAVEEN J, 14/779(2), Ambadi, K. Medu P.O., Palakkad, Kerala 678 012

The Western Ghats running parallel to the west coastal strip act as a strong barrier resulting in a distinct climate on its windward side, and a unique vegetation and biodiversity. The effect has been a rich avifauna for the state of Kerala very different from that of the peninsular plateau. Hence, many typical Deccan species have sparse distribution inside the state and this category of birds also includes a few storks. In fact, the Walayar reservoir (10°49'N, 76°51'E c.200m), in the district of Palakkad is one of the very few haunts for storks in Kerala. Five of the six species of storks recorded from Kerala have been spotted here of which one might have been a possible straggler. Of the five, painted, black and white storks have so far been considered as irregular winter visitors to the state. Nestled at the northern tip of the Palakkad gap, the proximity to the Deccan plateau might be the reason for these congregations. Moreover the gentle slope of the bed, the low emergent vegetation and the gradual gradient of water give the reservoir a Deccan touch. Unlike other waterbodies in Kerala, it provides an ideal habitat for storks which usually prefer vast open wetlands.

The movements and population fluctuations of the storks are governed by a host of factors like the strength and period of monsoons, inflow of water from the catchment areas, release of water for irrigation and the consequent exposure of mudflats etc. After visiting this place regularly for the past five years, I have been able to chalk out roughly the movement pattern of these birds based on the above mentioned parameters. Readers should bear in mind that an authentic sketch of their movements based on scientific reasoning is possible only after studying these factors for atleast a decade.

From my observations it is apparent that the monsoon months are least favoured by storks. It might be due to human disturbance near the temporarily shifted water edge and the absence of mudflats. Moreover it is the nesting time for these birds and none of them have got any known colonies inside Kerala except for an isolated pair of whitenecked storks nesting near Periyar lake.

Whitenecked storks (*Ciconia episcopus*) arrive here in ones and twos by October and peak to somewhere around fifteen which coincides with the abrupt water discharges. If the rains are bad this flocking usually takes place in January; sometimes even as late as in March. Painted storks (*Mycteria leucocephala*) are regular winter visitors arriving here in loose numbers just as the release of water starts. Numbers greater than ten had never been observed till an exceptional flock of sixty painted storks and some 150 openbills was reported by my friend, Sanju on 4.3.1996. This flock of painted storks dispersed after a day or two while the openbills stayed almost for a month and then followed suit. Openbill storks (*Anastomus oscitans*) are practically summer arrivals invariably seen wading in shallow depths rather than flocking on mudflats. But summers succeeding heavy monsoons are not usually preferred. This stork reportedly rare in Kerala in the seventies and early eighties

is at present frequenting various places in the state sometimes in large numbers.

The main migrant storks visiting Walayar is the black stork (*Ciconia nigra*) which regularly drops in at some time around December-January and usually bids farewell before March. Lately this stork is getting rare even during this brief staging period. A solitary white stork wintered here during 1995-96 season and was spotted on various occasions by my friends and myself in the month of January. It is expected that more might turn up next season. The movement patterns of the white ibis (*Threskiornis aethiopicus*) are more or less similar to that of storks and the largest congregation of twelve birds was observed on 28.2.1996.

Located at the border, Walayar reservoir is well connected by roads and lies midway between Palakkad and Coimbatore (25 kms from each town). The place is a haven not only for a beginner but also for a serious birder. Many erratic movements, and untimely records and extraordinary congregations have been noticed here in the past few years. To give an example, spotbill ducks are seen here all months of the year while it is considered a winter migrant elsewhere in the state. Hence, this place needs to be studied by more experienced persons to explain such a phenomenon. I am tabulating some general population trends of the storks of Walayar which visiting birders would find handy.

Species	Staging period	Average No	Peak No	Date of Spotting
White necked stork	Oct to Apr, May	10-15	29	26-3-95
Painted stork	Dec to Feb, Mar	8-10	60+	4-3-96
Openbill stork	Feb, Mar to May	25-30	150+	4-3-96
Black stork	Dec, Jan to Feb	5-8	14	8-1-94
White stork	Straggler	—	1	1-1-96

### References

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- Neelakantan, K.K. et al.. A Book of Kerala Birds. WWF-India
- Robertson, A. and Jackson, M.C.A. (1992). Birds of Periyar. Tourism & Wildlife Society of India, Jaipur.

[In a letter Praveen J Writes : "Referring to your comment on whitenecked storks (Vol 35, No 6) it should be noted that the largest flocking of the species at Walayar is 29 ... and even larger ones have been recorded from quite a number of places in Kerala]





## Summer Breeding of Waterfowl in Kota

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### Introduction

The breeding of waterfowl mostly coincides with the monsoon in Northern and peninsular India. The breeding season extends over July to October in the North and from November to February in South India. Abundance of food, availability of nesting sites, optimum atmospheric conditions, temperature, humidity, day length and a viable breeding population are factors determining the breeding season. In the past, a combination of such factors existed during the monsoon season. Now with the decline of natural habitats, man-made wetlands like reservoirs, dams, canals and seepage marshes provide suitable substitute for the more adaptable waterfowl species. Very few studies are available on the breeding of waterfowl in North India. Ram Chandran and Vijayan 1995, Vyas 1995, have reported on the breeding on jacanas at Bharatpur and Kota.

This study was conducted during 1995 and 1996, over two breeding seasons. The study commenced with the first nesting activity during both seasons, and lasted till the completion of the breeding. Preferences of particular tree species was also noted for the nesting birds.

### Study Area

Kota is situated on the banks of Chambal river in South East Rajasthan (25°10'N, 75°52'E). Chambal river is fed by a number of tributaries and streams flowing down into the river from higher elevations. Kota barrage, its reservoir and canal system have changed the hydrological cycle of the area. Presence of water in the reservoir, canal and seepage marshes is determined by the requirements of agriculture. Kishoresagar reservoir situated in the centre of Kota city provides an ideal shallow, vegetation filled wetland during the summer months due to the closure of the canals. The summer breeding was observed on a grove close to the reservoir and in a secluded campus known as Tabela house. Tabela house is situated close to the connecting canal between the barrage and the reservoir. Gadepan village is about 36 kms east of Kota city. The trees on which nesting colonies were seen are a part of highway plantation and stand about 4 kms from Kali Sindh river, a tributary of Chambal river. The last nesting colony was found at Anta, which is 48 kms East of Kota. Large tamarind trees close to a perennial stream harbour a cattle egret breeding colony.

The day time temperature ranged between 38°C to 48°C during the last week of March and June with no precipitation during the summer months. The humidity is extremely low during the summer months.

### Observations

The areas for the purpose of this study were selected on the basis of past observations and a recent survey of new

heronries in and around Kota. The observations from four different areas are given separately.

### Kishoresagar

It is roughly a 25 hectare man-made wetland, which presently acts as a reservoir from which the right main canal emerges. There are three tanks on its eastern end. A grove of 180 trees belonging to 6 genera is situated on the south bank of the reservoir. These trees were planted 5-8 years back by the department of irrigation. Two tanks are used for trapa cultivation whereas the third one is predominantly filled with water hyacinth. These tanks provide an ideal site for the breeding the bronze-winged jacanas, Indian moorhen and white breasted waterhen. Purple moorhen and pheasant tailed jacana also frequent these tanks, but they have not bred in this locality.

The bronzewing jacanas are the first to commence nest building operations in the month of March. In 1995, the activity was first seen on 16th March; and on 21st March in 1996. In both years, the chicks appeared in the middle of April. In 1995, a day or two day old chicks were found on 11th April. In the following year, the first nest was abandoned due to the disturbance from Trapa cultivators; and the chicks were first observed on 28th April. The breeding activity continued till June end. In 1996, two pairs of Indian moorhen and one pair of white-breasted waterhen were also seen with week old chicks in the last week of April. The chicks fledged within 6 weeks i.e. 10th June. Whitebreasted waterhen chicks have been seen in almost all months excepting winter (Nov-Feb).

Sporadic breeding of cattle egret was seen on the trees adjacent to the Kishoresagar reservoir but it was the first time in the summer of 1996 that most species of family Ardeidae and one member of family Phalacrocoracidae bred in a grove close to the tanks and the reservoir. Cattle egrets were the first to start nesting in the last week of March. They were followed by median egret, little egret, pond heron and Javanese cormorant. The activity peaked in the month of May when in all 94 nests of various species were counted. By this time the cattle egret had completed breeding and were replaced by greater number of Javanese cormorants and pond herons. Broadly the sequence of breeding in the area may be placed in the order: (bronze winged jacana, Indian moorhen, whitebreasted waterhen), (cattle egret, little egret, median egret), (javanese cormorant and pond heron).

### Anta

A small clump of 13-15 trees scattered roughly in one hectare area harbours a large colony of breeding cattle egrets. We have been observing this for last three years and

Table 1: Breeding months of Wetland Birds in Kota

Bird species	Breeding Season (Ali & Ripley)	Local observation
<b>Family : ARDEIDAE</b>		
Great egret <i>Egretta alba</i>	July-Sept	June-Sept
Intermediate egret <i>E.intermedia</i>	July-Sept	May-Aug
Little egret <i>E.garzetta</i>	July-Sept	Apr-Aug
Cattle egret <i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	June-Aug	Mar- Jun/July
Pond heron <i>Ardeola grayii</i>	May-Sept	Apr-June
<b>Family : PHALACROCORACIDAE</b>		
Javanese cormorant <i>Phalacrocorax niger</i>	July-Sept	Apr-July/Aug

**Family : RALLIDAE**

White-breasted waterhen <i>Amauornis phoenicurus</i>	June/July- Oct	Throughout the year except winter.
Indian moorhen <i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	May-Aug	Apr-June

**Family : JACANIDAE**

Bronze-winged jacana <i>Metopidius indicus</i>	June-Sept	Mar-June
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Table 2 : Preference of Trees for nesting

Area	Breeding Species	Total no. of trees	Trees with nests
Kisohresagar, Kota city Wetland + Grove	<i>Metopidius indicus</i>	Eucalyptus 106	None
	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	Dalbergia 54	All
	<i>Amauornis phoenicurus</i>	Delonix 7	2
	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	Canea 2	None
	<i>E.intermedia</i>	Azadirachta 3	2
	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	Ficus 5	None
	<i>Ardeola grayii</i>		
Tabela House, Kota City	<i>Phalacrocorax niger</i>		
	<i>Egretta alba</i>	Ficus bengalensis 2	None
	<i>E.intermedia</i>	F. religiosa 3	None
	<i>E.garzetta</i>	Tamarindus indica 9	All
	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	Acacia 2	2
	<i>Ardeola grayii</i>	Delonix 2	All
	<i>Phalacrocorax niger</i>	Zizyphus spp. 6	6
		Dalbergia 3	All
		Azadirachta 12	All
		Ficus racemosa 1	None
Gadepan village		Cordia spp 1	1
	<i>Egretta alba</i>	Acacia 16	All
	<i>E.intermedia</i>	Albizia 1	1
	<i>E.garzetta</i>	Tamarindus 1	1
	<i>Phalacrocorax niger</i>	Eucalyptus 22	None
	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	Prosopis 17	None
Anta	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	Tamarindus 9	All
	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	Acacia 13	All
	<i>Egretta intermedia</i>	Azadirachta 2	All
		Ficus bengalensis 1	All





this year more than 650 nests were counted on 9 tamarind, 3 acacia, 1 ficus and 2 neem trees. The tamarind trees had turned white with the droppings of the birds and cacophony of displaying, fighting, competing, nesting and feeding birds provided a wonderful tract of sound and sight to nature lovers. Nest building by cattle egrets was first seen in the last week of march, and it peaked by mid May, when a few nests of little egrets and one nest of median egret was also seen. But besides these few exceptions, it is a stronghold of cattle egrets.

### Gadepan roadside plantation

This heronry was first observed in May 1996. It exists one km ahead of Gadepan village on Kota-Baran state highway. The trees are a part of roadside plantation. In a stretch of about 100 meters on both sides of the road prosopis, acacia, siris, tamarind and eucalyptus trees are present. The nesting was observed on 18 trees of acacia, siris and tamarind. Although in the same stretch, 39 trees of eucalyptus and prosopis are standing, no nest was found on them. During our first visit on 17th May cattle egret, little egret, median egret were found nesting and subsequently in the next fortnight they were joined by large egrets and Javanese cormorants. Some of the cattle egrets and little egret nests had nestlings in them indicating that the breeding activity must have started in the first week of April. The maximum number of nests (342) were counted on 4th June. The larger trees like siris and tamarind were occupied by large egret, median egret, little egrets and Javanese cormorants. Cattle egrets and little egrets were nesting on desi babool (*Acacia* spp.).

### Tabela house

This is an enclosed compound in the middle of the old city. The building houses a number of government offices. Some very old ficus spp. and tamarind trees stand in the compound along with recently grown jujube, azadirachta, acacia, dalbergia and delonix spp. bushes and trees. Nesting of cattle egrets began in the last week of March, followed by little and median egrets. By mid-May pond herons, large egrets and a few Javanese cormorants had joined in. During the months of May and June, hectic breeding activity was observed in this massive heronry. Over 1200 nests of different species were counted during this period. Large egrets and Javanese cormorants were still breeding in the month of August and by then cattle and little egrets had left the area. This is a traditional heronry.

### Preference of trees

Most of the sites showed good diversity in terms of variety in the area. Kishoresagar and Gadepan roadside plantation have more prosopis and eucalyptus trees than indigenous trees. No nesting was seen on these two trees inspite of their greater number in the area. In Kishoresagar heronry, dalbergia was the most preferred tree, whereas in Gadepan roadside heronry trees with larger canopy and height like siris, tamarind or thickly growing acacias were preferred. Anta heronry has only old and large trees, which are fully used by the birds. Since Tabela House heronry is located in an enclosed and protected area even smaller bushes or trees like jujube, cordia, delonix, acacia are used for nesting. But the maximum number of nests were placed on the huge tamarind trees. Surprisingly, ficus bengalensis is not used by any bird species for nesting. The observations suggest that eucalyptus and prosopis trees are not preferred by the tree nesting waterfowl provided other trees are available. Trees with larger canopy and thick foliage are preferred.

A shift in the breeding season has been clearly seen over a period in this part of Rajasthan as a result of man-made, or man-altered, wetlands which provide nesting sites and food to the birds.

### Acknowledgement

The authors thankfully acknowledge the support of Dr V.G. Gokhale, A.H. Zaidi, G.G. Khinchi and Himmat Singh during the study.

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### NEWSLETTER CALLING

#### ENROL A FRIEND

If every Newsletter Member could enrol just one new member our effectiveness would be doubled immediately!

#### WILL YOU HELP?

Please give the membership forms to your friends and urge them to join.

- EDITOR



## CORRESPONDENCE

**AIMING AT HIGHER STANDARDS — A REPLY.**  
V GOKULA, A PRABHAKAR and G UMAPATHY, Salim Ali  
Centre for Ornithology and Conservation, Coimbatore

In reply to "Aiming at higher standards — a plea" (Vol.36, No.5, Sep/Oct 1996) of Mr V Santharam, the authenticity of the new record of little pied flycatcher is of importance.

If a person is familiar with the pied flycatcher shrike, no way he can confuse it with the little pied flycatcher when it is in front of him for a long while. Having spent years in a tiger sanctuary, we did not see a single tiger. It does not follow that there was no tiger and we should not deny its presence if somebody else saw it. Sighting of a species depends on the amount of time spent, expertise and interest, population of the species and its behaviour.

So long as the author differentiates the reported species from closely related species in the area, and is aware of its distribution range, it should be sufficient to merit publication. After all such reports make others look out specifically for the species. Sometimes subsequent reports of the species confirm its presence. If there are no further reports for many years, it is likely that it was a wrong report; or it was just a wanderer; either way it does not matter.

As far as the standard and quality of the Newsletter is concerned, it has to be improved as Santharam and Rahul suggested. We personally feel that the Newsletter has been creating considerable awareness about the birds and their habitats among the people more than the so called scientific journals. So it should not deviate from the current path. It has to give equal importance to amateurs as well as to professionals.



**IMPROVING THE NL ; BIRD SPOTTING IN J & K ;  
INDIAN DARTER. LAVKUMAR KHACHER**

If your Editor needs to be decorated, the one most significant contribution has been keeping the Newsletter alive for over 35 years. Whether material appearing is trash, this Newsletter has kept us all together — thank goodness for a number of articles that are being written at all.

It is too much to expect the Editor to whet articles as one would expect editors of the BNHS journal or Stray Feathers to do. If we have Red jungle fowls reported from the Anamalais, it is for the readership to point out the error. Would Santharam or Rahul have written their excellent pieces without these errors? We now await something on the strilated Buntings as promised by Purandare and Santharam, where is the interesting piece on woodpeckers from you?

I would like to make a similar comment on the "Check the species, Mr Editor" by our English friend (though his name certainly is not Anglo-Saxon sounding). If Soumyadeep had not listed the barbet and the pigeon he

did, he would never have heard of Knys whose experiences during his visit(s) to Assam would have been enjoyable for both the Editor, myself and a number of others who are progressively becoming armchair birdwatchers.

Lastly, let me affirm that the Newsletter is not, I repeat, emphatically not an ornithological journal. It is a birdwatchers' newsletter. I am not, as the Editor is not, an ornithologist. If there can be any grudges it is that more of our younger friends are not writing. I will conclude on an appreciative note commending the excellent photographs illustrating the cover by Sridhar — how about other young photographers coming forward? The whitebrowed bulbul is great!

## Bird Spotting in J & K

It is good to have Army Officers writing on the birdwatching they may be able to do. Noting the fact that a lot of the basics of Indian ornithology was by Service officers, one should not be surprised that officers have time to do birdwatching. Infact we should like to see more from our officers as they are very favourably placed, do have time since their day is so well regulated as against civilians who have no time because it is not budgeted. We would like more from the likes of Major BV Naresh (Vol.36, No.5, Sept/Oct '96).

Could the Major please make a list according to a systematic arrangement and not list birds alphabetically. In following a systematic order, he will find it easy to think of birds in their groupings e.g. — flycatchers, warblers, wagtails, etc. Alphabetic listing places a white-eye along side a whitebacked vulture whereas a griffon would go along with a green finch.

A little care is needed specially when a bird recorded is way out of its known range as for example the hill myna which is a bird of tall forests from Kumaon eastwards.

While wrynecks do pass through Poonch, the "resembles a mouse moving on the bark.." could well apply to a treecreeper. The unidentified parakeets could be the Himalayan slatyheaded parakeet *Psittacula himalayana* though care must be taken that the bird is not confused with the females of the blossomheaded parakeet *P.cyanocephala*. The "pheasant like bird" in the Paradise Grove appears suspiciously to be a cheer pheasant — could a rough sketch be sent? The second unidentified bird appears to be a male blueheaded rock thrush *Manticola cinclorhynchus*. The list suggests that Maj Naresh goes out birdwatching rather sporadically since Poonch would have many more species of birds passing up and down the mountains as well as passing through to and fro on migration from temperate Asia to Tropical India.

## Indian Darter

In quick response to my note in reference to that of V Santharam (Vol.36, No.5, Sept/Oct '96) I have a letter from "Santhu" — he could have sent his comments directly to the Editor but instead has written to me indicating his high regard for me which he knows is reciprocated. His reply has



been sent to the Editor with a request that it be printed alongside this in the next Newsletter (Unnecessary in view of Santaram's letter - Editor).

The annual waterfowl counts are great in that they get lots of people out of doors but the numbers they throw up must be treated with great caution. For example, in the earlier bird count reports an impression could be gained that Gujarat has more wetlands than say Bihar — the dense stipplings on sketch maps indicate that there are more people undertaking census work in western India than in Eastern (this does not mean that Gujarat is not an important wetland area, it is). Most of the locations covered by the censuses are freshwater jheels. The Gulf of Kutch, for instance would need to have observers on all the islands. Whatever the numbers may be, the fact is that darters are in a precarious position, but then, so are a host of other species — what, for instance is the position of the Pied kingfisher *Ceryle rudis*? Birdwatchers may well ask themselves when they last saw a river tern *Sterna aurantia* or a nesting pair of yellow fronted pied woodpeckers *Picoides maharattensis*. We may, perhaps, initiate a Raptor count each year on Dharmakumarsinhji's birth anniversary. We would be in for some serious jolts.

What we actually need is to spend more time birdwatching and then following up with keeping regular diaries. While writing a piece on the State of Gujarat's birds fifty years after Salim Ali's surveys I was dismayed to find how little I could lay my hand on.

In my mail I have a letter from Snehal Patel from which I quote — "Goats are creating havoc in our forest (The Dango). The boys grazing them simply chop down young trees, hence now there are no new trees growing in our forest.

Grey hornbills, flying squirrels and Black woodpeckers are now almost gone from Dango."

Snehal has an endearing habit of using backsides of other correspondence which in this case had been a letter from Santharam which states "I am pleased to enclose a copy of my final report of my great black woodpecker Survey for your information and records ..." How about Santharam writing an enjoyable account of his visit to the Dangs?



**DARTERS.** V SANTHARAM, 68, 1 Floor, Santhome High Road, Madras 600 025

Thank you very much for carrying my comments on the Newsletter in the Sept/Oct 1996 issue. I would like to mention the following in response to Mr Lavkumar Khacher's note regarding Indian darter which appeared in Pg.95 (I have already communicated this to Mr Lavkumar).

I had, in my note, only quoted the estimates provided by C Perennou in Vol.32 (1&2) [Jan/Feb 1992] issue of Newsletter. I am not saying this estimate is the last word on the status of this species (In fact, I do have my reservations on the quality and reliability of data generated by these

counts) but I think it gives a rough idea of its population as unlike some waterbirds, this is a distinct species with a low probability of confusion with other species.

These estimates have been based on the counts from 1987-1991. From copies of the Asian Waterfowl census reports, I find that the number of sites counted and darters reported over the years is as follows :

Year	# Sites		# Darters		
	All India	Gujarat	S. Asia	India	Gujarat
1987	172	*	*	*	*
1988	326	113	450	358	176
1989	650	170	922	751	25
1990	655	149	1328	1260	83
1991	816	204	937	628	210
1992	776	181	1026	809	176
1993	738	166	1442	1196	51

\* Report copy not available with me

Names of the sites counted each year are given in these reports. However, I am not sure if Gulf of Kutch has been counted as it may appear under some local name which I am not familiar with. I do, however, remember seeing several darters in the mangroves en route to Pirotan Island on 31.12.1989. There were several young birds in the congregation.

I am glad Mr Lavkumar Khacher has started this discussion and I hope there will be several responses to this from other ornithologists which could contribute more to our knowledge on the present status of the darter in India.



**RED-FACED MALKOHA.** T. W. HOFFMANN, Ceylon Bird Club, P.O. Box 11, Colombo, Sri Lanka

I have just received your Newsletter Vol.36, No.5. I notice that Lt. General BC Nanda reports the possible sighting of a red-faced malkoha in Karnataka. Recently I also received from a correspondent in Trivandrum a painting of the red-faced malkoha, and I noticed that the bird is a candidate for the Indian Red List. The painting, however, shows a bird which is not a red-faced malkoha, because the red on the face is less than half as extensive as it should be. It looks more like a large green-billed malkoha, a bird of the Lower Himalayas. I have submitted a paper to the JBNH for the Salim Ali Centenary number of the journal, in which I argue that there is no valid evidence to show that the red-faced malkoha occurs in India, and that is an endemic of Sri Lanka. I have been unable to find any authentic records of its sighting in India anywhere in the literature, except the two references in the Handbook, and I have examined these in my paper. Under the circumstances I would be greatly

obliged if you would let me know whether to your knowledge there are any other records of the presence of this bird in the sub-continent and if so, please let me have copies.



#### STORKS SEEKING ARMY PROTECTION IN BIHAR. SHAHLA YASMIN, C/o Mona Sales Corporation, Babunia Road, PO Siwan 841 226, North Bihar

A large colony of Asian openbill stork *Anastomus oscitans* may not be a rare sight in the Indian sub-continent but is certainly an unusual sighting in Bihar. I visited the Danapur cantonment area on 27.08.96, which is situated about 13 km west of Patna railway junction. This military cantonment is close to the Ganges and serves as a breeding ground for *A. oscitans*. I could count about 800 nests on the roadside as well as inside the cantonment area. The common trees used for nesting were neem *Azadirachta indica*, shisham *Dalbergia sissoo*, peepal *Ficus religiosa*, banyan *F. bengalensis*, mohwa *Bassia latifolia*, jamun *Syzygium cumini*, ashoka *Polyalthia longifolia*, *Cassia* sp., semul *Bombax malabarica* and bael *Aegle marmelos*. The birds have been nesting in this area for several years, probably because shooting and trespassing are prohibited here. I asked some military men whether they wanted to save the birds or they did not want any trespassers inside their campus. They said they wanted to save the birds. But their thoughts do not seem to have influenced the attitude of the common man, because, the birds are killed when they go out for feeding in the Ganges.

#### Acknowledgement

I thank Suprabhat Pvt Ltd, Patna for providing me a vehicle for surveying the area.



#### RARE SIGHTING AND RANGE EXTENSION OF EUROPEAN BEE-EATER (*MEROPS APIASTER*). Justus Joshua, V. Gokula, and P Sampathkumar, SACON, Coimbatore 641 010, Tamil Nadu

On 12th February 1996 we went to Sathyamangalam forest division in Bhavani Sagar area, Tamil Nadu. We reached Karachikorai Medu village at 0635 hrs and walked through very dense Acacia dominated scrub forest. We saw fresh elephant signs, chital and wildpig. After walking for about 2 km on the metal road, we walked alongside Bolipallam, an ephemeral stream which meanders through this forest. We reached Pudubeerkadavu village on the banks of this stream and were preparing to have breakfast, when VG spotted a bee-eater perched on the electric line. Initially we thought it was a blue-tailed bee-eater (*M. philippinus*). On looking through the binoculars the yellow

around the cheek and throat with the black gorget was clearly seen. The mantle was chestnut similar to that of a chestnut headed bee-eater (*M. leschenaulti*) and the body blue green with shorter projecting pin-feathers in the tail. In a flash we were able to see the yellow and chestnut colour on the back. In order to get a proper look we moved close and saw the bird clearly. Undoubtedly it was the European bee-eater.

There were 14 birds perched on the electric line in a cultivated land above a well. This was just 25m east of the Bolipallam and c.4 km east off Bhavani Sagar dam. We watched them for about 20 mins after which they flew giving alarm calls because of a shikra *Accipiter badius* and disappeared. The call was also different from that of the other bee-eaters.

This bird has been reported only once from Tamil Nadu in the Mettur dam in Salem district (Roy 1968) and Karamadai in Coimbatore district (Mohammed Ali pers. comm.). It is a passage migrant in NW India, Himachal Pradesh, Garhwal, Punjab, Rajasthan and a breeding visitor to Kashmir (Ali and Ripley 1989). We consider this a rare sighting since it was last sighted a decade ago. The European bee-eater winters in Africa as far south as Cape Province (Ali and Ripley 1989) and this sighting could be on the way back to the breeding grounds.

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#### A NOTE FROM LINCOLNSHIRE. L A HILL, 32, Hillside Drive, Grantham, Lincolnshire NG31 7EZ

I was out on the Coto Domiana last spring — as usual and was delighted to see the marshes full of water: they had been dry for the four preceding years due to drought.

You say you always remember our meeting at the Bolani, ores iron mine in Keorghar Dist — as do I of course — and wonder if we shall ever meet again! I see there is a World Birding Conference being held at a Centre not 45 miles from here, from 4- 6 April, and that one Asad Rahmani (Centre of Wildlife and Ornithology, Aligarh Muslim University) is giving a talk on "Bird Conservation in India". If one of the august bodies to which you belong would pay your fare to attend this conference, then we could well meet again! I have just attended (last weekend) the annual British Trust for Ornithology meeting at this centre. I usually go to the Ringers' Conference also, the first week end in January, but have decided this year that I cannot afford to go to both.



However, I must say that I would like to attend the World Birding Conference: It will be held 4-6 April 1997.

I have just been re-reading your "words of wisdom" in Vol.36, No.1 Jan/Feb 1996: very well written, and would have been far over the heads of the non-scheduled VIP's whose presence caused you to abandon your speech. I agree with all except the coal miner's birds, which were nearly always canaries, these did not usually die when in the presence of small amounts of CO, but would fall off their perch, thus warning the miners, who would then return to fresh air, where the canaries would revive! Mice were also used, but it was not so easy to see when they were affected by the gas, as it was to see the canary falling off the perch! My father's men used them in the First War when tunneling under the German trenches.



**FIELD OBSERVATIONS OF THE WHITE-WINGED WOOD DUCK — 2.** DR ANWARUDDIN CHOUDHURY, Near Gate No.1 of Nehru Stadium, Islampur Road, Guwahati 781 007, Assam, India  
3 October, 1993, Choraipung, upper Dihing RF (west block), Tinsukia district

A WWW duck was located in a pool, north-east of Jorajan (27°20'N, 95°30'E), at 9.55 am. This pool is about 2 km north-east of "WWW duck pool" (as the crow flies) described in the last article [NLBW, 36(5): 85-86].

I observed the lone duck for 190 minutes. During this period, it spent 110 min on feeding and foraging, 48 min swimming (without foraging), 14 min resting, 13 min preening and 5 min other activities (in flight, on alert with stretched neck, etc.) (Fig.1). During this period, it covered (in flight as well as swimming) about 650 metres. Daily ranging (part) including flight path and movement (swimming, foraging or just floating) routes are shown in Fig.2.

Feeding and foraging were done while floating or swimming on water. Foraging here implies leisurely feeding at regular intervals while floating or swimming. Rest and preening were done while perched on fallen logs.

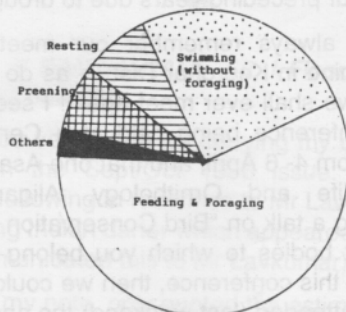


Fig. 1 Activity pattern of WWW duck as observed for 190 min starting from 9:55 a.m.

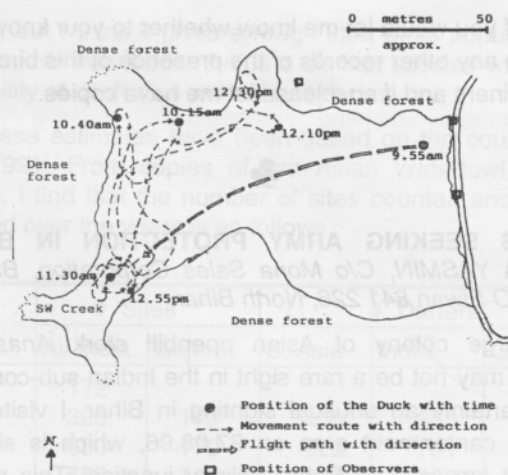


Fig. 2 "OIL Mag Pool" near Choraipung

### Interesting observations

- 1 Whenever alarmed or frightened, the duck retreated towards south-western creek only. This shows that the south-western corner of the pool is considered to be safer than the others.
- 2 The duck did not panic when a motor-cycle was started only about 150 metres away but was on alert with stretched neck. Then it slowly moved towards south-western creek, partially hidden by vegetation. Once the motor-cycle passed, it again came out to more open water.
- 3 It seemed to be quite at home in open water as well as under direct sunlight even preening on a log under direct sunlight.
- 4 The WWW duck panicked and jumped for about 2 metres when a white-breasted waterhen *Amaurornis phoenicurus* suddenly started calling from behind the vegetation at the pool-edge. The duck then turned around (after the jump) and curiously observed the source of the call with stretched neck.



**SPOTTED MUNIAS (*Lonchura punctulata*) FEEDING ON SCAT ?,** PRACHI MEHTA, Senior Research Fellow, Wildlife Institute of India, P.B.18, Dehradun, Uttar Pradesh

On 3rd November, 1996 Kanishka Rathore and Vinayak Mathur, two school-going enthusiastic bird watchers accompanied me to the sal forest patch near our Institute at Dehradun. As we neared the dried river bed, we saw a pair of spotted munias (*Lonchura punctulata punctulata*) on the ground picking on something on the rocks. Half expecting it to be grains or seeds of some kind, I could have almost ignored it but for the fact that it looked big and black from afar. As I saw through my binoculars, it turned out to be scat of a domestic dog. We observed the birds for a couple of minutes before they flew off and it appeared that they were actually feeding on the scat. Ali & Ripley (1983) describe grass seeds, weeds and occasionally insects as a diet for the birds of genus *Lonchura*. This rather aberrant food item of spotted munias seems to suggest their versatility in exploiting varied food resources near human habitation.

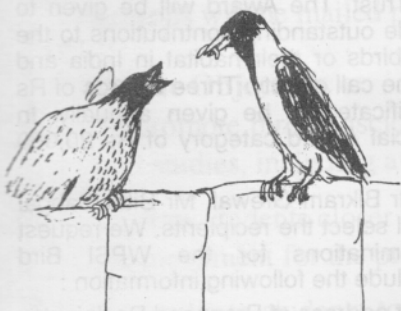


# QUESTIONS ABOUT KOELS. MRS PRAGATI NAYAK, "Aashirwad", Sampe, PO Aryapu, Puttur 574 210

If you could take the trouble to answer a couple of questions, I would be very glad.

From about the middle of last month, I have been hearing strange bird sounds - shrieking and cawing along with the sound of flapping wings. After about two days I was able to see what was going on — a pair of female koels seemed to be harassing some crows. While the crows drove them away, the koels kept returning again and again.

The koels are as big as the crows and are able to fly around perfectly well yet they spend the whole day demanding food. They follow one crow (whether it is one particular crow or not, I can't say since all crows look alike to me) all the time opening their beaks wide, crying and flapping their wings. Most of the time the crow gives them vicious jabs with its beak and they fly off, shrieking. Sometimes it actually feeds them, other times it completely ignores them. This drama is enacted daily in the mornings, afternoons and evenings on our garden wall, on rooftops and in trees. If I had a camera I would have sent you a photograph. As it is, I have enclosed a rough sketch for your interest.



Now, is this the normal way koels behave? It is a well known fact that koels are brought up by crows but don't they leave the nest on learning to fly? These two koels are excellent fliers yet they spend all day demanding to be fed like fledglings. They even caw like baby crows!



# HOUBARA BUSTARD AND SHORT EARED OWLS IN EASTERN RAJASTHAN. BHARAT SINGH, BHIM Niwas, Gumanpura, Kota 324 007

Last year, on 4th December, I sighted a houbara bustard *Chlamydotis undulata* at Sorsan in Baran district in south east Rajasthan. It is the eastern most record for this species in India. On 27th December, 1996, I saw a very light coloured Houbara skulking in a mustard field at Para village near Kekri in east Rajasthan. The light colour of the bird could be attributed to its being a young bird or a female. The mustard and gram fields are surrounded by fallow grass land and scrub, so the setting is perfect for a Houbara as well as a short eared owl *Aseo flammeus*, also a specialised grassland bird. I found a group of three shorteared owls at one spot and three solitary individuals scattered in the area. It is a irregular winter visitor to east and south-east Rajasthan and these sightings may be worth recording.



# GREEN GUARDS. PROF PRAKASH BHOJE, Green Guards, 2541, B Mangalwar Peth, Kolhapur 416 012, Maharashtra

Two years ago we have registered our club green guards under Societies Registration Act. We have established a good interaction with the staff of Forest Department (Wild-life wing) Kolhapur.

We are particularly worried about a small lake Kalamba near Kolhapur township which is the home for 38 or more species of water birds most of them migratory. Hundreds of migratory water birds visit here regularly, consequently it is an attraction for bird-watchers and bird-poachers as well.

From Sept 1994 we have taken up the campaign of including the local residents of Kalamba town, in preventing the bird shooting there.

Most of our members are eager to subscribe for your magazine, so please send us details of subscription and other relevant information.



# AN UNEXPECTED GUEST. RIKI KRISHNAN, Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore

On 16 August 1996, I was surprised to see a white breasted kingfisher, perching on the rim of the dustbin in our compound. It was around 16.05 hrs, I waited for the next move of this creature. After about 10 minutes, it dived into the dustbin. No sooner did the kingfisher dive, a pair of jungle crows which were watching the kingfisher from the gulmohar tree, flew into the dustbin, and the kingfisher was caught unawares, and had no alternative but to fly off in a jiffy. The question which comes to mind is "Is there a possibility of a food resource crunch in this habitat?" If so, we could be fortunate in seeing kingfishers with other garden birds in our neighbourhood.



# A NEW HERONY OF LITTLE CORMORANT, PHALACROCORAX NIGER, IN SOUTH KANARA, KARNATAKA A.K. CHAKRAVARTHY, Entomologist, University of Agricultural Sciences, Bangalore

The bordering areas of Chikmagalur and South Kanara districts in Karnataka present a picturesque landscape enveloping some of the most interesting stretches of evergreen forests of the Western Ghats. In this forest tract is a small town, Bajagoli.

Bajagoli (13.13°N, 74.55°E) is 8 km east of Karkala, 62km west of Kudremukh ranges and about 20 km north of Venur. Bajagoli faces the Kudremukh (13.09°N 75.12°E) (1892 m height) which is the birth place of rivers Thungabhadra and Nethravathi and is known for iron ores.

During October 1996, little cormorants were found nesting on trees scattered around the Bajagoli bus stand. Nests consisted of a loose platform of sticks and were 10 to 35 m from the ground on a rain tree, *Samanea saman*. The Number of nests and birds on the trees were (18 + 8 + 5 + 6) nests with (44 + 28 + 18 + 22) birds, respectively. The number of nests and birds corresponded to the canopy size and in turn, to the height of the trees. A majority of the nests contained three chicks each. The young ones in a nest showed much variations in growth.

At intervals of 12 to 14 minutes, parents were observed bringing food (mainly fish, also frogs) for the chicks from



rivulets flowing 4-6 miles away, from three different directions. Kadari, Miyar and Manjaltar are the three rivers from where the birds were observed bringing food. The adult-birds were observed sunning, preening and resting at the topmost or peripheral branches of the nesting trees. On the adults, the black and silvery grey feathers were prominent. While on the young, the black and the white feathers were more noticeable.

Many of the villagers were unaware of the birds nesting on the trees as the birds were silent and did not attract the attention of pedestrians. Villagers informed me that the birds were found nesting only from 1995 on these trees. Birds arrived in May and departed by December. Together with little cormorants, 2 nests of pond herons were also found.

As Salim Ali and S.D. Ripley (1983) note little Cormorants usually nest in enormous mixed colonies at swamps. In addition, little cormorants also nests singly or in smaller numbers on trees at considerable distances from water. The finding of the nesting colony at Bajagoli represent perhaps one of the several instances in recent times where birds disturbed from their original habitats are taking to new nesting/roosting sites. Preservation of small nesting colony such as this one therefore, is important.

### Reference

Salim Ali and S.D. Ripley (1983). Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan (compact Edition), Oxford University Press, p.41.



### THE AGRAM MILITARY FARM.

The Army has played an important role in conservation merely by being the custodians of large open areas, and I have written in the past about birding in Agram, and the fine views of black-winged kites, harriers, swallows and others. A few days ago I was there on horseback at 7 A.M. and was amazed by a group of drongos, at least fifty, landing on a rain tree. I have never seen these birds in such a large group before. The next day they were seen again but rather spread out over the fields. Perhaps all the drongos that spend the day feeding in individual territories, congregate here for the night. Their deeply forked tails suggested that they were ashy drongo, but they looked very black. I can say no more about their identity.

Yesterday evening there was not a drongo in sight, but there were a number of wren warblers flying in and out of the tall grass. I am not sure of the species. One looked like Franklin's and a few others like fantailed streaked warblers.

There were the migrant swallows in large numbers, and I believe they were feeding on mosquitoes.

Z.F.



## ANNOUNCEMENTS

### VISIT ISRAEL

The Israel Ornithological Centre (IOC) and the Israel Bird Ringing Centre (IBRC) are recruiting experienced ringers and field birdwatchers to volunteer at different ringing stations in Israel from March 1997 and onwards. There will be 3-4 active ringing stations. Depending on the length of their stay, volunteers can work at any or all of the stations. The IOC will fund accommodations for those ringers/birders staying for a minimum of 4 weeks. There is an option to come for a shorter period of time at the expense of the volunteer. All applicants should send a relevant CV to the IOC at:

**IOC, SPNI, 155 Herzl St, Tel Aviv 68101, ISRAEL,**

**Fax: +972-3- 5182644**

**E-mail: ioc@netvision.net.il**



### WILDLIFE PROTECTION SOCIETY OF INDIA The WPSI Annual Bird Conservation Award

The WPSI Annual Bird Conservation Award is sponsored by the Edgeworth India Trust. The Award will be given to individuals who have made outstanding contributions to the study or conservation of birds or their habitat in India and Nepal, beyond or above the call of duty. Three awards of Rs 10,000 each and a certificate will be given annually. In exceptional cases a Special Award category of Rs 20,000 will be conferred.

A jury consisting of Mr Bikram Grewal, Mr Bittu Sahgal and Ms Belinda Wright will select the recipients. We request anyone sending in nominations for the WPSI Bird Conservation Award to include the following information:

- 1 Name and permanent address of Proposed Recipient
- 2 Age, position and official address of Proposed Recipient
- 3 Describe in detail the reasons for meriting the nomination
- 4 How long have you known the Proposed Recipient and assessed his/her work?
- 5 Name and full address of nominating person/agency

Please send in your nominations before 31 March, 1997, to the Executive Director of WPSI, at the address given below:

**Wildlife Protection Society of India**

Thapar House, 124 Janpath, New Delhi 110 001, India  
Telephone (91 11) 3320573 Facsimile (91 11) 332729

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Cover : **lora** (*Aegithina tiphia*) ; female brooding at nest. Of the size of a sparrow, loras usually go about in pairs along the edge of the forest and scrub jungles. The male lora in particular carries off spectacular acrobatic manoeuvres to the accompaniment of sweetly intoned whistles, which vary from one to three syllables. The name lora is probably derived from the Latin *io*, meaning 'a cry of joy'. The bird is called 'Madhuka' in sanskrit, meaning 'one who sings sweetly'.

Photo S. Sridhar, ARPS



To Commemorate

*The Golden Jubilee of India's Independence  
and*

*The Birth Centenary of Dr. Salim Ali  
The Grand Old Man of Indian Ornithology*



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To facilitate students to understand the broader principles involved in the conservation of biodiversity, with ornithology as the basis for such an understanding

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Radhika Herzberger, Ph.D., Director

Stephan Harding, B.Sc., D.Phil., Schumacher College, U.K., Hony. Advisor

S. Rangaswami, M.A., B.Sc., M.Ed., Head of Department and  
Hony. Chief Warden, Rishi Valley Bird Preserve

S. Sridhar, ARPS, Bird Photographer and Field Studies Expert  
(Rangaswami and Sridhar are authors of *Birds of Rishi Valley and Renewal of Their Habitats*)

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## Silent Observer

PAUL EVANS

She was watching me long before I saw her. She seemed part of a branch, close against the trunk of a large beech overhanging the edge of wet wood-land at the southern end of the Wrekin. Her plumage echoed all the colours of the wood; the beech's greeny grey, the oak's rich tannin, the alder's russet, the birch's dusty silver. The dark yew shadow of her eyes fixed me with a deep enclosing silence.

Although I've looked into the gaze of an owl before, it's always a moment of transfixed stillness. This stillness unites submerged threads of mood and feeling, just as she united earthly fertility and under-world ghostliness for those who trod this path through spring woods thousands of years before me. Her face appears in neolithic mother-goddesses. She was the Indo-European prototype of the classical Minerva. She was venerated by early Celtic cults. And then she vanished into the twilight of legend and superstition. To the Scots she became the night-hag. To the Welsh *aderyn y corff* — corpse bird. She was Blodeuwedd who killed her husband the god Lleu, and was turned into an owl.

Suddenly her head spun round to face the wood and I realised that she had been watching me from the centre of her back. Her wings opened and with a few crushingly silent beats she was gone. Tawny wings into the tawny wood. She left behind stillness which even bird-song couldn't break. Her plumage colours scattered into the trees.

The point of this — the significance of the owl and the potency that she carries as a symbol — is that there is a wood for her to vanish in. The owl's signature can only be written here. Another owl in another forest, on the other side of the world from this Shropshire hill, also carries dreams into the trees. The spotted owl has become a symbol of resistance to the clearing of ancient forests in the American Pacific Northwest. Here, people fighting the destruction of forests see in the wild life of the owl what is missing in their rootless culture; an attachment to landscape, habitat, place.

That owls and trees are inextricably linked has been a hard ecological lesson to be learned. And for many places, learned too late. As the environmental philosopher Holmes Rolston said, "The forest is where the 'roots' are, where life rises from the ground. A wild forest is, after all, something



ILLUSTRATION : BARRY LARKING

objectively there. Beside it, culture, with its artefacts, is a tissue of subjective preference satisfactions."

Despite the fears, hopes and dreams we project into the lives of Nature it remains free of our cultures. Nature is not what it is for us — we should be what we are for it. And so when the owl and I meet on a path, it is a moment of recognition and then a parting of ways, each of us making our way through the wood according to our natures.

The wood remains, as it has for centuries. In this part of the world that is almost a miracle. Britain has only 10 per cent tree cover, and most of that is plantation. In the last 50 years we have lost over half of our ancient woodland and much more than half our owls. The mire wood that the owl vanished into is a sliver of alder, birch and holly growing from a sedgy swamp where spring water oozes from the bottom of the hill. From here ditches and streams begin a journey south through wooded dingles to the River Severn.

In these woods, just as the flush of life is being drawn from dark mud, just as the mud gives life to the river, the owl's silence held everything. She held the buds from opening, the stream from flowing, and in her gaze held that deeply buried knowledge that Spring is both sex and death.

Courtesy : Guardian Weekly, 28 April '96